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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1988, 33 representatives from 20 institutions or organizations sponsoring National Issues Forum (NIF) literacy programs attended a national conference in Washington, D.C. Throughout the conference, representatives from the organizations sponsoring NIF literacy programs made statements on the importance of NIF as a tool for learning basic skills and as a means of giving citizens who would otherwise be left out the nation's public policy debate a chance to take part in it. Updates were presented on NIF literacy programs for English-as-a-second-language, adult basic education, and General Educational Development program students on three topics: "Freedom of Speech: Where To Draw the Line," "The Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security," and "The Trade Gap; Regaining the Competitive Edge." (This document includes brief reports on the NIF forums held in the following locations: Brooklyn, New York; Port Washington, New York; Mound, Minnesota; Mt. Vernon, Georgia; Los Lunas, New Mexico; South San Francisco, California; Anoka County, Minnesota; and Shakopee, Minnesota. (MN)

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NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS

SPECIAL REPORT LITERACY PROGRAM

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National Forums '88

photo/Linda Bartlett

"Through the Forums, we can begin to hear people who have been underrepresented," says Andrew Kirshner, a teacher for the Literacy Program at Brooklyn Public Library, during a discussion with policymakers and policy experts at National Forums '88.

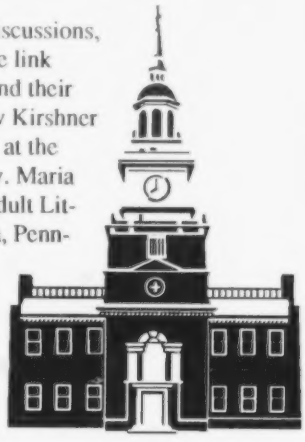
This spring, 33 representatives from 20 institutions or organizations sponsoring NIF Literacy Programs attended National Forums '88 in Washington, DC. Held from March 9 to 12, this conference was the culminating event for the 1987-1988 series of National Issues Forums.

For the past five years, NIF has sponsored annual national conferences — in March, the Presidential Library Conferences and in April, Washington Week — to give citizens an opportunity to meet with policymakers to convey the results of the Forums. This year National Forums '88 was created to combine the report on the Forums with a celebration of the bicentennial of the United States Constitution.

National Forums '88 was attended by members of Congress, congressional aides, journalists from the national print and broadcast media, and representatives from civic and educational institutions throughout the nation which sponsored Forums this past fall and winter.

Throughout the conference, representatives from the organizations sponsoring NIF Literacy Programs made statements on the importance of NIF. They explained that NIF is a valuable tool for learning basic skills and also a means to give citizens, who would otherwise be left out, a voice in our nation's public policy dialogue.

"With the Forum discussions, students began to see the link between public policy and their own lives," said Andrew Kirshner of the Literacy Program at the Brooklyn Public Library. Maria Wall, a student in the Adult Literacy Project in Monaca, Pennsylvania, said "in the Forums we are able to learn more about, and become more aware of, the world around us."



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Expansion Project Update

Through funds from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and design support from the Kettering Foundation, the NIF Literacy Program will be expanded into 30 states over the next 3 years. An important goal of the expansion strategy is to develop in each of the 30 states a cooperating network of literacy provider systems. The objective is to provide training and support for local providers who are integrating the NIF Literacy materials and discussion format into their programs.

Virginia Paget, NIF Literacy Program coordinator, Mary Hurley, training coordinator, and Jean Hammink, program consultant, have been working with formal and informal coalitions of provider systems — Adult Basic Education, volunteer, literacy, and corrections programs. In Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Connecticut, California, Florida, and New York, they have introduced the program and are recruiting literacy providers for pilot projects. Also, statewide workshops are being organized by state humanities councils, adult basic education departments, and literacy coalitions.

In addition to these state training opportunities, practitioners and trainers are invited to attend the Kettering Foundation's annual Summer Public Policy Institute, a comprehensive training program for organizers of NIF programs.

NIF, a series of nonpartisan discussions of public policy topics, is a program of the Kettering Foundation.

1987-1988 Overview

During this past fall and winter, Adult Basic Education and literacy programs in ten states discussed three National Issues Forums topics, "Freedom of Speech: Where to Draw the Line," "The Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security," and "The Trade Gap: Regaining the Competitive Edge."

Participants in the Forums were literacy, ESL, ABE, GED students and tutors, and other members of the communities. Classes and discussions were held in schools, corrections facilities, libraries, community centers, and community colleges. Types of discussion groups ranged from small study circles with 4 to 20 students to large Forums with 50 to 60 participants.

Tutors and students prepared for the discussions in various ways — by reading the issue books; through preliminary discussions about the topic and the NIF method; and, in some cases, with vocabulary work which included explanations of concepts and their historical contexts.

The amount of time spent on the topics also varied. In some of the study circles, students discussed a single issue in one session; in others, students attended a series of discussions on one topic over a six-week period. In the large Forums, participants discussed one issue in one meeting.

"A Holistic Approach to Literacy"

Across the country, Adult Basic Education and Adult Literacy teachers have been working the past three years to broaden their programs and build a bridge between the traditional curriculum and students' larger needs for self-development. They are finding that the materials and methods of the National Issues Forums (NIF) Literacy Program provide a valuable addition to the curriculum covering basic skills. Shirley Georgi, a volunteer coordinator for the Westonka Adult Basic and Continuing Education Project in Mound, Minnesota, calls NIF "a holistic approach to literacy."

The National Issues Forums is a nationwide, nonpartisan program designed asa new method to help citizens learn about important public policy issues. Now going into its seventh year, the Forums will be sponsored this fall and winter by more than 850 civic and educational institutions in communities throughout the United States.

Since it is directly related to adult interests and adult interaction, the NIF Literacy Program empowers students to take responsibility for their own learning. Experience and research indicate that such group discussions enhance the students' sense of personal competency and self-esteem and motivate them to set and realize their own literacy-related goals. With NIF, students are practicing and developing critical thinking, group problem solving, and communications skills.

The idea for the NIF Literacy Program grew from the suggestions of six literacy convenors who, after meeting with NIF sponsors in October 1985, took the Forum materials into their home communities and fashioned them to fit within their literacy programs. Then pilot projects, sponsored jointly by Laubach Literacy Action, the Kettering Foundation, and B. Dalton Booksellers, were set up in 13 different ABE and adult literacy programs.

Now the NIF Literacy Program is being used in ABE and adult literacy programs in ten states. Those who have been separated from the mainstream of public life by barriers of language, race, age, rural and urban isolation are now participating in the National Issues Forums. And as a result of their participation, they are feeling a new sense of belonging and more confidence in expressing their opinions.

All the programs using the NIF Literacy Project materials vary slightly in their formats. In this report you'll read about a few of the ways in which teachers and tutors are using the NIF materials creatively and successfully in their programs.

What these educators do share is a feeling that adult learners in these programs are achieving more than literacy skills. Many report that participants have become interested in national issues and that some have realized for the first time the importance of their individual voices in the democratic process.

BROOKLYN

PORT WASHINGTON

MOUND

MT. VERNON

LOS LUNAS

SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO

ANOKA COUNTY

SHAKOPEE

BROOKLYN, NY — Role playing has proved a creative and successful way to introduce NIF issues discussion in this library-based literacy program.

"This material has turned out to be much more exciting than we expected," says Jeanne Cowen of Brooklyn Public Library's adult literacy program, which serves native-born and non-native-born adults who have reading and writing problems. This year, staff members used three originally written skits to introduce students to the issue of freedom of speech.

"We were looking for a way to lighten the topic without oversimplifying it," says Cowen. The skits, which were presented at a monthly student meeting, featured both literacy staff and students who role-played individuals confronting three freedom of speech issues: a debate between Jerry Falwell and Larry Flynt on freedom to publish pornography; a dialogue on whether or not Nazis should have had the right to march in Skokie, Illinois; and a discussion about music with suggestive lyrics between a rock musician and a distressed parent.

Following the skits, the 50 participants broke up into small discussion groups. "In the small groups, we went into the issue in more detail," says Cowen. Discussion was often lively. "We had no problem getting the students to talk. People who disagreed learned to sit back and weigh what the other guy said."

Following the small group discussions, the entire group reconvened to hear a round table discussion on the topic.

To prepare for the program, volunteer tutors had covered the NIF material by

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reading aloud from the issue books to students, and by specially prepared activities, such as crossword puzzles based on vocabulary from the freedom of speech issue.

Even more exciting than the success of the skits, Cowen says, was the success of what followed: the literacy students then took part in community National Issues Forums which were open to the public.

"Because our students had experience with the material, they felt comfortable participating as part of the community group. They were active participants," says Cowen, who believes the program's success surprised everyone. "The staff members who showed up at the Forum were bowled over by what they saw."

What they saw were adult literacy students who seemed to have gained confidence. "The degree of improvement in several students' sense of self has been astounding," Cowen says. "They didn't have to, but at the community Forum, all of our students identified themselves to the public as literacy students. They seemed to feel proud."

PORT WASHINGTON, NY — In Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes in this Long Island community, NIF materials worked well both as discussion starters and as learning tools.

"For many of our students, this was the first chance they had to express themselves," said Barbara Mallon, teacher for the Lifelong Education and Advancement Program (LEAP). The program serves a wide variety of immigrant groups with both adult education and English as a Second Language (ESL) training.

To prepare for NIF discussions, ABE 1 and ABE 2 classes joined together to view the NIF video on freedom of speech. After the tapes, the two groups separated to study the NIF materials in several class sessions. Students in the advanced class read the NIF Literacy Program issue book on their own, while teachers of the lower level students read the books aloud, or in unison, paragraph by paragraph, with the students. English as a Second Language students read the NIF Spanish translation issue book on their own, then went over the English language issue book in class.

"Basically," said Mallon, "we incorporated the NIF materials into the classroom structure."

But even while students worked their way through the book, learning new concepts and vocabulary, the issues discussion continued. "The discussion never stopped," said Mallon. "Since many of our students came from countries where they didn't have freedom of speech, they were very interested in the topic."

After studying the issue, the various classes met together for a final, large group discussion. Again, the event was spirited. "I was quite surprised," said Mallon, "at the quality of discussion and the level of the students' insight."

For instance, she stated, while a few students believed that Americans have too much freedom of speech, others grasped the complexity of the issue. "One woman stated that freedom of speech is a privilege, and we need education to handle it," according to Mallon. "She said that along with education comes the ability to tolerate others' ideas."

MOUND, MN — The National Issues Forums Literacy Program has helped to create a feeling of community among volunteer tutors and students in this rural Minnesota literacy program.

"Our people live far apart. We don't have a natural group situation here," says Shirley Georgi, volunteer coordinator for the Westonka Adult Basic and Continuing Education Project, which serves 12 districts in the far western suburbs and rural area surrounding Minneapolis. "The NIF program works well in small, rural communities where you need a starting point to get people together."

To promote a group identity, the Westonka project has, for the past two years, sponsored a Forum to draw together far-flung tutors and students. Preparation for the Forum begins in the fall, when tutors at an in-service meeting take part in a simulated NIF discussion. After a talk on various NIF techniques, the tutors take home the NIF issue books and materials. Over the next few months, they work one-on-one with students — reading the issue books aloud with the student, studying vocabulary, or working simple exercises — to prepare for the NIF discussion.

Finally, the tutors and students gather for their Forum. "We try to make it a comfortable evening," says Georgi. "We begin with a pizza party, then move on to a discussion of the topic."

The discussions have been successful. "We've had good results. Those who have participated have felt very positive," Georgi says. "The students felt free to speak up so that the discussions have been good ones."

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Members of an intermediate English as a Second Language class — immigrants from Cambodia, Colombia, Iraq, Poland, Russia, and Spain — participate in a Forum sponsored by Westonka Adult Basic and Continuing Education in Mound, Minnesota.

Becoming a Citizen

The feeling of being an important part of the larger community is often an experience expressed by participants of the NIF Literacy Program. Leslie Shelton, director of Project Read in the South San Francisco Library, described the following exchange that took place in her adult literacy class.

"In the early part of the discussion on the freedom of speech issue, the participants often talked about the need for protecting others — their children, etc. I continued to ask what needed to be protected.

"Walter said, 'You ask what you need to protect? — Yourself! — That's what people need to protect. That's why they don't get involved, because they're protecting themselves. ...they just take care of themselves.'

photo/Leslie Shelton

Walter Miles, a participant in the Forums sponsored by Project Read in South San Francisco, California, discusses the freedom of speech issue with a tutor and other participants.

"At the end of the Forum, when I asked if any of them had changed their mind on something, Walter responded: 'By keeping your opinion and thoughts to yourself, you only harm yourself. By discussing and getting different points of view, then you get a better outlook of what freedom of speech really is.'

"This seemed to be a perfect example of what it means to become a citizen. When the individual frame of reference expands beyond the individual self."

As well as enhancing the participants' group cohesiveness, the NIF evening helps students to listen to others' opinions and to base their own opinions on facts, according to Georgi. "Most of our work is on basic skills," she says. "This program gives us something at the other end of the spectrum to give us a holistic approach to literacy."

MT. VERNON, GA — "It's unusual in a prison setting to have a program which the prisoners enjoy and which administrators see as having a social benefit," says Barbara Church, director of the evening college at Brewton-Parker College, which offers college classes to the Georgia state prisons. "The National Issues Forums Literacy Program has proved to be just that."

Last year, the NIF Literacy Program was presented in one Georgia prison. This year, it has expanded to nine prison locations. The reason for the expansion, Church believes, is that prison administrators became involved in the NIF planning.

"Last year the NIF got good feedback. Then it filtered back to the state level that this was a good program," she says. Consequently, the Georgia State Department of Corrections formed a convenor committee which oversees the Forums. Staff members in nine corrections institutions received NIF training to use in literacy, GED, and college classes.

"Everybody — prisoners and staff — have benefited from the Forums," Church says. "It's a win-win situation. That's rare in corrections."

One of the most unusual aspects of this Georgia NIF program is its use with emotionally disturbed and mentally disturbed inmates at Georgia State Prison in Reidsville.

"Even though these inmates are handicapped," says Dr. Jane Hall, who directed the program for handicapped inmates, "It's important that they have an opportunity to give their opinions on issues."

Discussion on issues was not new among the handicapped inmates, but discussion on national issues was.

"They thought this kind of discussion was wonderful," says Dr. Hall. "It made them feel important."

LOS LUNAS, NEW MEXICO — National Issues Forums discussions are offered at all four of New Mexico's medium-security and maximum-security state prisons because "The NIF program is a positive approach to broadening student understanding and involvement in society," says Cecil Smith, assistant director for New Mexico Corrections Department's Education Bureau. He also cites NIF's role in "strengthening inmates' basic skills and ability to communicate."

In its second year with the NIF Literacy Program, the New Mexico program involves nearly 200 inmates and 13 staff in literacy, ABE, and college-level classes. Most program participants studied the freedom of speech issue, while others studied the issues of crime, joblessness, the trade gap, and relations with the Soviet Union.

Approaches to the NIF program varied according to class level and student needs. In ABE classes at the Central New Mexico Corrections Facility, teacher Vladimer Telarick led his students in covering two chapters of the NIF issue book per week, with students writing summaries of the material. During the weekly NIF discussion "the students expressed their opinions and listened to each other," Telarick says. "For the majority of students it's a great program."

Telarick credits the NIF with sparking student interest. "The material is provocative," he says. "This is one of the most popular classes I'm teaching."

SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO, CA — Because the National Issues Forums Literacy Program enables adult learners to communicate more effectively in the community, it meets the goals of Project READ, a library-based literacy program.

"We want our program to go beyond helping people learn to read," says Project READ director Leslie Shelton. "Literacy should be about getting people to participate in the community, to talk to each other." (continued next page)

photo/Leslie Shelton

Inez Gatt (front, left), a participant of Project Read at the South San Francisco Public Library, looks over the NIF issue book with tutor Marge Levy.

To help people talk to each other, Project READ sponsored a National Issues Forums program on the topic of freedom of speech. The 17 people who attended were adult learners and their tutors. "It was a great discussion," says Shelton of the February event.

To prepare for the Forum, several tutors — community volunteers who meet twice weekly with their students — introduced the NIF Literacy Program materials in their one-on-one meetings. Others learned the background of the issue from the NIF videotape which preceded discussion. After the videotape, participants broke up into small groups for discussion, then reconvened in the large group.

For at least one of the participants, the NIF program produced a significant shift in opinion. "At the beginning of the evening one adult learner said that people who weren't involved in issues were being responsible citizens," Shelton says. "At the end of the Forum he stated that now he understood that if people didn't get involved, they were giving up their responsibility to govern themselves." (See related box story on page 5.)

ANOKA COUNTY, MN — The NIF Literacy Program has helped to motivate tutors in this volunteer-based literacy program north of Minneapolis.

"The NIF materials are like a breath of fresh air for the volunteers," says Elaine Coehn, coordinator of 300 Laubach volunteers in the Metro North Adult Basic Education project. "It's something new that keeps them interested."

First, the volunteers and students go through the NIF Literacy issue books together, reading aloud and discussing new concepts and vocabulary. After studying the issue one-on-one, the tutors and students join with others for a Forum.

The Forums offer students important information for their daily lives, Coehn believes. "These people are voting taxpayers who need to know about issues but have no way to find out," she says. "The Forums help our students to become good citizens."

Just as important is the effect the materials have on tutors. "The ones who have used the NIF materials have been very positive," she says. "They all want to do it again."

SHAKOPEE, MN — About half the members in this Forum discussion were participants in the Chaska and Shakopee Adult Basic Education classes offered through the Carver-Scott Cooperative Center in Chaska, Minnesota. The other half were residents at MCF-S, short for Minnesota Correctional Facility-Shakopee — the state women's prison.

They all had one thing in common — an interest in national issues. And they had met at MCF-S three times over the past few months for discussion of national issues using NIF materials.

Barbara Colhapp, lead teacher/facilitator for Chaska and Shakopee Adult Basic Education, had involved members of her evening classes in the Forums in the hope that it would stimulate their interest to read and learn more about what is happening outside their own worlds. Colhapp says the effort has been a success: "The students feel worthwhile because they can express an idea," says Colhapp. "I believe knowledge enhances one's self-esteem more than anything."

Diane Martinka, the ABE and GED teacher at MCF-S, had led residents in NIF study sessions. Colhapp and Martinka decided to get the two groups together. "We really needed the larger, mixed group for it to work," explains Martinka. "For one thing, it stimulated more study. Also, the residents liked the awareness that they're just people."

During the discussion on the trade issue, both groups expressed basic understanding of the facts, as well as definite opinions about what might be done to help restore the U.S. balance of trade. Response to questions about Americans buying foreign versus domestic goods included comments about quality, price, and the effect on jobs.

"Take the auto industry for example," said Nancy Jensen, MCF-S resident and editor of the prison newspaper. "When people are buying foreign products, what are our manufacturers doing? They're laying people off!"

Later, while discussing possible courses of action to correct the trade imbalance and the apparent differences between American and foreign companies, one of Colhapp's students said, "Managers

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Photo/Howard W. Voight

in the U.S. tend to be too worried about profit margins and not enough about workers."

From Colhapp's perspective, the NIF Literacy Program accomplishes a number of things. "First, the students learn about the democratic process of argumentation, that it's OK to disagree, that it's OK to change your opinion," Colhapp says.

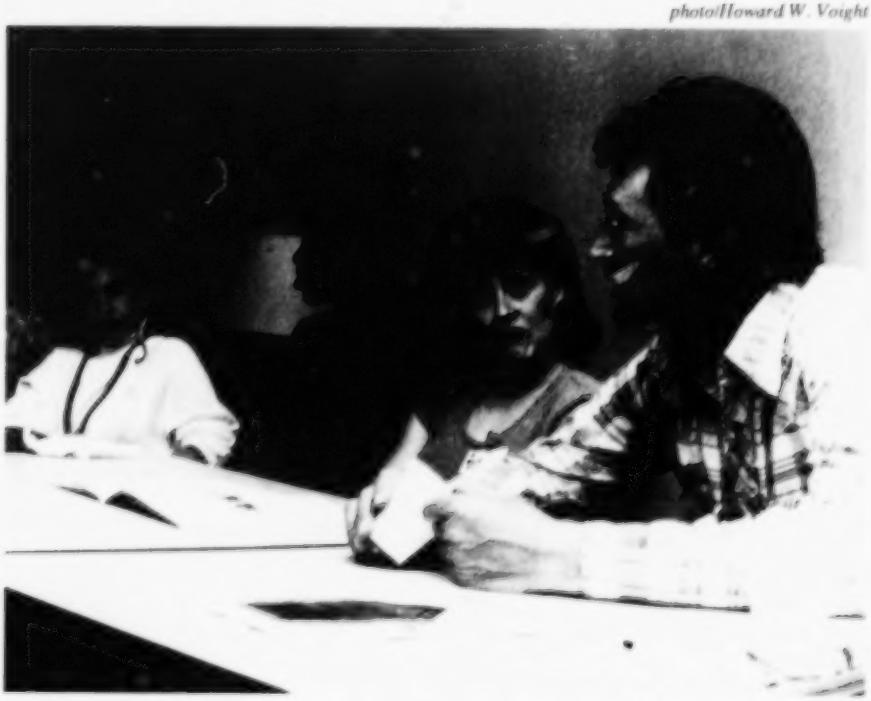
She adds that the Forums increase the participant's vocabulary and also stimulate their interest in reading, especially newspapers. "They take a great deal of interest in the newspaper," she says. "It's not boring anymore. The subjects are more interesting to them now."

Contributed by Howard W. Voigt, communications coordinator for the Carver-Scott Cooperative Center in Chaska, Minnesota.

Nancy Jensen (center, background), editor of the MCF-S newspaper, shares her thoughts on the trade issue.

"I enjoyed the open discussion because I learned a lot from other people's feedback," said Gary Lillienthal, a participant in the Chaska and Shakopee ABE class and the NIF discussions with MCF-S residents.

photo/Howard W. Voight



Abridged NIF Books

Central to the NIF Literacy Program process are issue books written on each of the three NIF topics. Produced by the Public Agenda Foundation and the Kettering Foundation, the NIF issue books present a nonpartisan, nontechnical analysis of each issue in the light of realistic policy choices from which Forum participants can choose.

Special editions of the NIF issue books are prepared for the NIF Literacy Program. While maintaining arguments and policy choices identical to those in the original versions, these abridged editions are written on the 4.5 to 6.5 grade level. They make use of more white space and larger type than do the standard issue books, and are about half the length. As with the NIF issue books, the abridged books contain questionnaires that Forum participants should complete both before and after the Forums.

NIF Literacy Program

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☐ I would like to recommend the following person as a potential convenor for the NIF Literacy Program:

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TOPICS

____ *The Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security*
____ *The Trade Gap: Regaining the Competitive Edge*
____ *Freedom of Speech: Where to Draw the Line*
____ *Crime: What We Fear, What Can Be Done*
____ *Immigration: What We Promised, Where to Draw the Line*
____ *The Farm Crisis: Who's in Trouble, How to Respond*
____ *Welfare: Who Should Be Entitled to Public Help?*
____ *Taxes: Who Should Pay and Why?*
____ *The Soviets: What Is the Conflict About?*

Available in Spanish edition

____ *The Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security*
____ *Freedom of Speech: Where to Draw the Line*

Available August, 1988

____ *Health Care for the Elderly: Moral Dilemmas, Mortal Choices*
____ *Coping with AIDS: Responding to the Epidemic*
____ *The Public Debt: Breaking the Habit of Deficit Spending*

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